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Initial Report on Libyan Plots Stirred Skepticism

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A front-page article in The Wall Street Journal on Aug. 25 saying Libya was plotting new terrorist attacks prompted almost immediate skepticism and conflicting information from other major news organizations as they sought to confirm The Journal's report.

Citing unidentified "U.S. and West European intelligence officials," The Journal's article said the United States was on a "collision course" with Libya. It also said that "growing evidence suggests" new Libyan terrorist attacks were being planned, and that "the Pentagon is completing plans for a new and larger bombing of Libya in case the President orders it."

All three network television evening news programs repeated the substance of The Journal's report the night after it appeared, citing unidentified Administration officials. But the NBC News program added the first hint of skepticism when it said that "Administration officials seem to be hoping that by talking tough through the news media, they would scare" Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, the Libyan leader.

In the Aug. 26 issues of many major newspapers, identified and unidentified officials were quoted who seemed to confirm The Journal's article, though there was no explicit official confirmation.

Others Questioned Report

But the report's credibility was also being questioned by other Government and military officials.

The Washington Post on Aug. 26 quoted an official who "confirmed essential details" of The Journal's article. But the same article quoted "one military source" who said, "Somebody seems to be whipping things up." The Post reported that "another source" said, "There's a disinformation campaign under way."

On Aug. 27, The New York Times directly challenged reports that Colonel Qaddafi was planning new acts of terrorism, based on "Administration officials" who said there was no "hard evidence" of such plans. The Times's article quoted officials who said, "A report Monday in The Wall Street Journal about 'new signs' of Libyan activity was a misguided, unauthorized and premature effort on the part of some people in the Administration to stimulate anti-Libyan feelings."

On the same day The Washington Times, a conservative newspaper that is viewed by many news organizations as reflecting debates in the Administration, quoted extensively from Le Monde, saying that "the Reagan Administration had perhaps launched a deliberate campaign of disinformation," though the Washington paper did not quote any of its own sources for such charges.

The Associated Press also said some unidentified White House and State Department officials had "insisted" there was no "compelling evidence" of new Libyan terrorist plans.

Statement by Speakes

The New York Times's article prompted Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman, to deny that the White House was engaged in a disinformation campaign.

In an off-the-record statement at a news conference on Aug. 27, Mr. Speakes said that although The Journal's article was "not authorized, it was highly authoritative."

Mr. Speakes's statements, attributed to an unidentified Administration official, were widely quoted by news organizations, including The New York Times.

But the credibility of the evidence of a new terrorist threat was also being widely questioned, and confusion over the issue in the Administration had be-

come one of the most important aspects of the evolving press coverage.

"In a sudden outpouring of confusing official pronouncements on Libyan terrorism, the same senior official who said one thing publicly contradicted himself in private," The Associated Press reported on Aug. 28, without identifying the official. The A.P. dispatch quoted unidentified Administration officials as both supporting and denying that hard evidence existed.

Reagan Order Is Cited

In a news analysis in The New York Times on Aug. 29, Leslie H. Gelb, citing "Administration officials," said the confusion came after President Reagan ordered his aides in late July to "get two messages across to Libya: that the Administration was seeing new signs of Libyan involvement in terrorist activity, and that it remained ready to punish Libya with military force if that activity continued."

Mr. Gelb continued, "What Mr. Reagan's directive did not say was how this was to be done, the officials said, whether quietly through diplomatic channels or through a White House announcement or a report planted in the press."

"According to White House, State Department and Pentagon officials, one or more officials on the National Security Council staff, and perhaps elsewhere, took it upon themselves to provide information for a news article," Mr. Gelb wrote. "That article, in The Wall Street Journal on Monday, set off a series of confirmations, denials, elaborations and clarifications that is still unfolding."

On the same day, an article in The Washington Post on the "resurgence of tension" between Libya and the United States said, referring to the National Security Council, "As of yesterday, several important officials continued to say that a N.S.C. staff member acting

on his own volition had 'leaked' the latest U.S. plans to The Journal. The newspaper's managing editor, Norman Pearlstine, said the story was the product of 'some old-fashioned reporting' from a variety of good sources, 'not at all a planted story by the Administration.'"

'Contradictory Signals' Seen

Newsweek's Sept. 8 issue, which reached newsstands on Sept. 1, described "contradictory signals" from the Administration, with one group of unidentified officials saying there was hard evidence of new Libyan attacks, and others saying evidence "was sketchy at best." The same date's issue of Time referred to the conflicting reports and said, "To some, the shadow-boxing smacked of psychological warfare."

In its coverage, The Wall Street Journal repeated the substance of its original report and cited the confirmation by Mr. Speakes that the article was "authoritative."

After a report in yesterday's Washington Post that said The Journal had published "false information" provided by the Administration, The Journal issued a statement saying that, if the Government had conducted a "domestic disinformation campaign, we were among its many victims."

But Mr. Pearlstine, The Journal's managing editor, said yesterday that the newspaper had not determined if its Aug. 25 article contained false information.

"The reporting which produced our Aug. 25 story came from multiple sources in multiple agencies of the U.S. Government as well as several foreign governments," Mr. Pearlstine said in a statement.